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A Seagoing Family Spying for Money

The Vital Question: 'How Much Damage?'

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Make no mistake, the Walker spy case is a serious matter. Why they did it is perhaps the most important question of all, but the first order of business in any case of espionage is damage assessment. Government prosecutors aren't saying how many secret documents were delivered to the Soviets over the last 15 or 20 years by the four men arrested so far. Odds are they don't know. But the alleged leader of the ring, John A. Walker Jr., 47, who retired from the Navy as a chief warrant officer in 1978, was arrested in a Maryland hotel May 20 after an attempt to deliver a trash bag containing documents to his Russian case officer. Prosecutors say Walker's son Michael, 22, was arrested on the aircraft carrier Nimitz two days later with 15 pounds of similar documents. That represents a lot of secrets right there.

Worse news is bound to come. The other two men arrested in the case—Walker's brother Arthur J., 50, a retired lieutenant commander, and his California friend Jerry A. Whitworth, 45, a retired senior chief petty officer—both had access to secrets of real importance involving techniques of anti-submarine warfare (in Walker's case) and cryptographic material (in Whitworth's). Those are things that can affect the outcome of wars.

You can be sure the government will do everything it can, which is plenty, to make a new secret of the extent of the damage. But you can also be sure the government will never know the extent of that damage unless Walker and his son, who both pleaded innocent to espionage charges, change their minds and decide to cooperate. It's not hard to determine what the alleged spies learned in the course of their Naval careers—job descriptions lay it all out neatly—but it's very difficult to know what they might have picked up with a little curiosity and sticky fingers.

Despite the best efforts of security officers, something like chaos reigns where secrets are concerned. Documents get misrouted and mislaid on desk tops. People talk. Safe doors are left open while secretaries go down the hall to the bathroom. Whole libraries of secrets routinely passed through radio communications centers, where Walker and his friend Whitworth both worked.

Not long ago I met a man who had been stationed at the Naval Weapons Laboratory in Dahlgren, Va., back in 1964. One day, while making an inventory of secret documents after the door to a walk-in safe had been left often, he noticed in a corner some big cardboard boxes filled with computer punch cards. He asked an enlisted man what they were. He was told they were targeting coordinates for the entire SIOP, the Single Integrated Operational Plan that determines where U.S. nuclear warheads will go in the event of all-out war. Targeting information for the missiles on Polaris submarines was routinely transmitted to the Naval Weapons Lab from the main computer of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS) at Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Neb. Some months earlier the JSTPS computer had failed to shut down after sending the Polaris data, and spewed out cards for the whole SIOP—the designated targets for every last warhead and bomb in the American strategic inventory. The guardians of the safe didn't know what to do with them, so they simply piled them in a corner. This sort of thing makes security officers feel ill, and they are often ill. Walker and his alleged colleagues may have stumbled across almost anything in the course of rummaging about for years on end. Transfer to Moscow was only a Xerox machine away.

How much does this matter? Not knowing what was compromised makes it hard to say. Detailed Soviet knowledge of the American approach to anti-submarine

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warfare over two decades would be no joke. If you want an idea of what's involved, read Tom Clancy's novel, "The Hunt for Red October," a kind of "military procedural" about a large-scale sub-hunting operation. But the potential cryptographic losses are the real wild card in the Walker case. These alone could make it the worst breach of military security in American history. A document is only a document, whatever it may contain, but access to coded communications opens a door into continuing operations. In wartime nothing is more important than knowing where an enemy plans to go and when he plans to go there. The major British contribution to Allied victory during World War II—second only to sticking it out when Britain faced Germany alone—was the reading of secret German radio traffic encrypted on Enigma machines. If the Soviets had similar access to U.S. naval communications in wartime the consequences would be enormous. But this is not wartime, and the damage—whatever it is—will gradually be repaired.

It's what you don't know that hurts most where military secrets are concerned. Walker's arrest by itself solved a big part of the problem by alerting military officials to the breach of security. Repairing the damage is basically a question of housecleaning—changing procedures and equipment. The latter can take time, and in some cases could never be possible. There has been some speculation in the press that Walker may have compromised "compartmented" knowledge. This is a technical term meaning information protected by its own codename. Frequently it refers to a source or method for the acquisition of intelligence—a way, let's say, for determining that a Soviet nuclear submarine is about to put to sea. This could be something simple and seemingly innocuous: A boxcar full of potatoes might routinely appear at a certain siding two days before sailing, or some part of the ship's gear, warmed up for departure, might give off a telltale signal. Some years ago, for example, a Defense Intelligence Agency analyst discovered a way to determine what Soviet SS-9 missiles were pointed at. It was a simple thing: The Soviets could easily have hidden it. Since they did nothing they probably didn't know we knew, or know how we knew. Once a secret like that is gone, it's gone for good.

The job facing security officers now will be to figure out why it happened so they can discourage a repetition. This raises the question of a motive. Ideology apparently had nothing to do with it. In the 1930s and '40s Soviet intelligence depended heavily on sympathizers with the world's only socialist regime. The atom spies (Klaus Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo, Allan Nunn May and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg) and the Cambridge circle (Guy F. Burgess, Donald D. Maclean, Anthony F. Blunt and Kim Philby) were all recruited on the basis of ideology. But this cannot explain many other Soviet successes. A retired CIA counterintelligence officer once told me he thought Soviet spy runners had an almost hypnotic ability to get people to say yes. They knocked on a lot of doors, often with amazing bluntness, and it seemed to work. The alleged pitch to John Walker may never be known, but nothing has turned up from his friends and family so far to suggest he ever thought working for the Soviets might advance the world revolution or serve world peace or anything of the like. Money and excitement seem to have been the key.

This has been the pattern with other recent spy cases. It is notoriously difficult to generalize about the motives of spies because there are, relatively speaking, so few of them. It's not like divorce or applications to law school. Something over 4 million people in the United States have security clearances and we may assume all of them begin to feel the pinch again within a month or two of the last raise. Money explains why they're working, not why they're spying.

Perhaps the explanation is that they don't really feel it matters. It's one thing consciously to betray your country in a moment of danger, quite another to slip a sheaf of technical data into a manila envelope from the cartloads of the stuff at the office headed for the shredder. It's wrong, that's for sure, but who's ever going to know, and what difference does it make? The Cold War is already 40 years old and officials in Washington insist we're going to go right on deterring the Soviets—not fight them—forever. So what if the other side picks up a pointer or two about the hydrophone system that helps track Soviet submarines? Everybody knows war is impossible in the nuclear age. No one gets hurt. It's all just part of the Great Game. Did John Walker, if guilty as charged, ever think he was threatening the life of his son on the Nimitz? I imagine not. It's a curious fact that the officials who try to protect American military secrets, and the people who sell them, share a sense of disbelief—we may be preparing for a big war with the Soviets, but we're never going to have it. The rest of us, interestingly, are worried sick.

Thomas Powers, author of "The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA," is working on a book about strategic weapons.